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WASHINGTON TALK

Briefing

A Phone Call to Casey

It has been widely reported that William J. Casey, Director of Central Intelligence, recommended early last week that the Justice Department consider prosecuting NBC if a report it aired relating to strategic United States communications systems proved true.

What is not so well known is what prompted the action. In fact, Benjamin C. Bradley, executive editor of The Washington Post, confirmed that it was apparently a telephone call to Mr. Casey — a telephone call from Mr. Bradley.

Mr. Casey had earlier warned The Post that if it published information it had obtained concerning the Ronald W. Pelton spy case, which involved sensitive communications information, the newspaper would risk prosecution under espionage statutes. The Post held off. But when Mr. Bradley saw an NBC News "Today" segment about the spy case, he promptly telephoned Mr. Casey to complain.

"I asked him what he intended to do with the NBC story," Mr. Bradley recounted, "and he didn't know anything about it."

Once apprised, however, Mr. Casey reviewed the program, according to Mr. Bradley, and that afternoon announced he was recommending prosecution.

"I just asked him what he was going to do," Mr. Bradley said. "I was not daring him to do anything."

When asked about the matter, a Central Intelligence Agency spokesman said, "The C.I.A. does not discuss the Director's private conversations."